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ABSTRACT

In order to equalize educational opportunities, individualized instruction in the beginning reading program is suggested. Children should have equal opportunity but not identical instruction. Reading readiness, as determined by reading skills, and reading interest should determine when instruction begins, whether it is kindergarten or the third grade. Individualized reading that utilizes the language experience approach to reading instruction is recommended. A successful beginning reading project in Puerto Rico is cited. (MKM)

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EQUALITY IN READING INSTRUCTION*

Estoy Reddin

In a conference considering the equalizing of educational opportunities it is appropriate to examine equality in reading instruction inasmuch as reading instruction has, historically, been a large component of the curriculum of the elementary school. An early act passed by the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1647, known later as the "Satan Deluder Act", made it mandatory that teachers be provided to teach children to read. As a result the "dame" schools, as they were called, came into being. No other curriculum than reading was prescribed until many years later. In other countries of the New World little "escuelitas" similar to the "dame" schools of New England emerged as attempts were made to teach children to read in order that they might enter formal schools for other learning. That all children would learn to read became a national goal in many countries with the development of compulsory school laws and the teaching of reading had priority in the program for children entering the elementary school.

Need for Equality in Reading Instruction

A large portion of the school day both here in Puerto Rico and on the continent has been, and still is, devoted to reading instruction on the assumption that if there is enough teaching of reading all children will learn to read and become readers. One has only to look at the children in many schools,

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however, to realize that this assumption has not been validated. Some children do become good readers; others are average in their reading skills, while still others seem to have such poorly developed skills that they do little or no reading. The question is frequently raised as to why this is true. The common preparation of teachers and the similar allotments of time for reading instruction in all schools, with the use of similar or even identical books and other reading material, are cited as evidence of equality in instruction. What is often overlooked is that equality does not necessarily mean identical instruction. What it should imply is equal opportunity in obtaining the kind of instruction that will enable each individual child to develop his abilities to the fullest. Children are not identical. They have their own unique capabilities and experience. Therefore Professor Stoops believes that

> there cannot be anything common (or equal) about educational experience. This is because every human experience is personal, private, and subjective. All experience is within a consciousness that is personal. Personal consciousness is organized by intention or will; it is given meaning by modes of valuation related to the person's religious orientation; each personal consciousness has a past that is unique, and which also adds meaning, value, and understanding to the experiences which occur within it. . . .
>
> Experience, therefore, is something each child creates within his own private world of memory, intention, and worth, and, while others may appreciate it, only the child can know it.[1]

A look at children shows the uniqueness of their experience. Lenny brings his book and little chair to sit at the feet of his parents when they, both professional people, read in the evening. Adult reading behavior is something that Lenny at fifteen months is already trying to imitate. Lisa gets two of her own cherished books and hands one to an adult, saying, "Let's read". Busily

engrossed with her book Lisa does not realize until some minutes later that the adult has closed the book after having read it through silently. Whereupon she takes the book from the adult, opens it, and returns it, admonishing, "Talk to it". At thirty-three months Lisa is recognizing, albeit vaguely, some connection between reading and language. Since John was three months old his mother has been reading to him. At three years old he greets his parents on their return from a wedding with the question "Was Chouchou there?" Characters in the various books he and his mother have shared are his friends so he expects that Francoise's charming donkey will be at all weddings.[2] For a considerable time Eric has been the proud owner of a number of books. He is nearly finished kindergarten and is aware of the reading preparation that he is getting there. Now he approaches his mother with the question, "How much longer do I have to wait to read stories in my books?"

Children like Lenny, Lisa, John and Eric come to school with some understanding of what reading is and with a desire to learn to read for themselves, but other children, as several investigators[3,4,5] have found, come to school with little or no understanding of what reading is, nor even of the purpose of coming to school. It is possible that many of the latter have never seen a book in their homes nor observed an adult who is reading.

Reordering of Priorities in the Reading Program

If there is to be equality in reading instruction for all children changes must be made in two important aspects of the reading program. The first changes must be in the when of reading instruction. Present practice is

to initiate instruction in reading for all children in first grade. Thus there is usually no reading instruction in the kindergarten. For children like Lenny, Lisa, John and Eric this can be a distrubing situation since they come to school eager to read and eager to continue activities involving reading in which they have already engaged at home. Before the kindergarten year is over these children may have acquired the concept that reading is something that you do at home while school is a place to play. For children such as Lenny, Lisa, John and Eric there should be opportunities to continue the process of learning to read. This would not mean the institution of formal structured reading programs in the kindergarten, a practice against which many people took a stand in the 1960's[6], when some states made rulings against reading in the kindergarten. Instead it would mean a continuation of activities in which these children would have already engaged in their homes. Durkin, who has made two longitudinal studies of children who were early readers, offers suggestions as to what this would involve:

> Were I to try to put into kindergarten programs the kinds of things that encouraged the early reading ability of children in my research, I would begin with a kindergarten teacher who not only answers questions about written language but who also plans ways to increase the questioning. In the research, the preschool questions of children were frequent, and the questions were about street signs and car names as often as they were about words appearing in books. When books did help, it was generally while a parent read to a child, and, on occasion, pointed out words that were of special interest or importance.[7]

Durkin also states:

> I would also be quick to remind teachers that the preschool children who were interested in reading, or in writing, were not necessarily interested every day. On some days, according to their parents, the

> children would be occupied for an hour or even longer with the kinds of questioning and with the kinds of pencil and paper activities that can lead to skill in both reading and writing. On other days the interests of the children were very different, and might go in the direction of playing house or of building with blocks.[8]

At the same time for other children in the kindergarten and first grade equality of opportunity does not imply instruction in reading during their first months or even years in school. Children who have no understanding of what reading is will probably have little desire to undertake reading activities for which they see no purpose. Dolch believes that

> Liking to read is the most important thing that any child can secure from the school. If the child likes to read, he will struggle until he learns how to read and to read well.[9]

What Dolch has said about liking to read is also applicable to wanting to read. If a child wants to read he will struggle to learn to read. Pooley states:

> The child's first experience with books and their contents, his first enjoyment and appreciation of literature in the form of stories and poems, is by his ear. At home, if he is fortunate, but at least in the public library, the kindergarten, and the first-grade room, he meets the characters of fact and fancy which books can bring him, and he responds to the rhythms, sound, and images of verse with a developing sense of their value to him. These experiences are extremely important to reading instruction. If the child is to learn to read, he needs motivation to carry him through the difficult tasks of association involved. The best motivation is the realization of what books can give him, once he has learned to use them.[10]

Children coming to school with no desire to read should have opportunities to learn things appropriate to their experience and interests. Books and other materials, read by both adult and child members of the class, would enrich the learning and bring a new element into the experience of these children. Such experience with books and reading should, in time, arouse the desire to "do it for themselves" and hence generate a need to learn to read. For many

children this probably will not occur before the end of kindergarten. For some children it may not occur until the end of first grade. For a few such a desire may not develop until second or even third grade, but whenever the desire to learn to read does develop the task should be undertaken with no concomitant sense of failure because of a later start.

The when involves not only "when" to initiate instruction in reading but also "when" instruction should be given once the task is undertaken. Although the usual practice is to give such instruction on a daily basis Durkin, as indicated above, found that the early readers were not interested every day. Children in the elementary school are not interested in reading at the same time every day nor for the same length of time as every one else in the class. In speaking of his school an elementary school pupil told the writer, "You're free to do anything you want to. You don't have to read a special book and stop at a special time." Another pupil indicated that she liked the school because one can "read when you want to and as long as you want to."

Changes in Procedures and Materials

Changes are also needed in how reading instruction is provided. Changes should be made in the procedures used. For many years an entire class was taught as a unit on the assumption that all the pupils needed and could benefit by the same instruction at the same time. More recently there have been efforts to make some provision for individual differences by breaking the larger class unit into smaller groups for instruction. Even though such grouping practices, whether within a single classroom or between different

classrooms, tend to reduce the size of the group that receives instruction at one time, instruction is still based on the presumed need of the group. Activities planned for groups do not take into account the particular experience and needs of each individual in the group. If a child consistently does all the exercises correctly on each page of the workbook or other similar material it is evident that the child does not need the exercises and could use the time required by them more profitably in other ways.

Children often recognize limitations in group instruction. They may object to reading a list of so-called "new words" taken from the teacher's manual because, as one class told their teacher,"those are not new words". It is possible that the words were not new to that particular group, even if they had not been presented previously in their readers, inasmuch as children learn words from many different sources. Children see other limitations of group instruction, too. A pupil in one school stated, "I read at my own speed. I don't hurry through a book. I take my time with every book. I can remember about what I'm reading. In the other school they hurried you. They didn't give you a chance. When I'm in a big group my mind goes blank."

It is assumed that adequate provision for learning to read has been made if a large block of time is set aside each day for reading instruction. Additional reading may be done at home with books made available from the school library. Children, however, often want time to read at school. Sometime ago Steve, the son of a high-school principal, announced jubilantly at the family dinner table that at last he and his classmates had gotten their teacher

to do what they wanted, namely, give them one period each week when they could "just read".

Closely associated with the need for time to read is the need for a place to read. While desks or tables and chairs arranged in rows may seem orderly and desirable to some administrators and/or teachers, such an arrangement is not necessarily conducive to reading. A seven-year-old girl reminded her friend to "tell her [the writer] about the trouble you have about reading." When questioned as to what the trouble was she replied, "I can't ever find a place to be quiet. Everybody is in the place." Equal opportunity should include providing a place where a child can read in freedom, a place where he can be alone with his book if he so desires. Places to read in school are particularly important for children whose homes do not and/or cannot provide such facilities.

Changes also need to be made in the materials used. The various series of "reading books" (readers) are presumedly prepared in accordance with results of investigations of the common needs and interests of children. Such materials, however, do not take into account the diversity within the groups that use them. For many children the language in which the materials are written may be unfamiliar since it is different from that which they use in their daily life. Since dialectical differences exist within any given language children may use a different dialect in their home from that of the school. Other children may have an entirely different language, e.g., French or Hungarian rather than Spanish (or English), as their mother tongue. Yet these children should

also have an equal opportunity to learn to read. Many now accept the premise that children have a right to learn to read in their mother tongue. Later they can learn to read in other languages.

In order to meet the problem of appropriate materials many educators now advocate use of the language experience approach in beginning instruction in reading. Such an approach utilizes materials dictated by the children in their own language about their own experiences. Since children are involved in the writing (composing) the materials are relevant and easy to comprehend. Thus the process of learning to read is facilitated. Gradually, as skill is acquired, other materials are introduced, provided that the content of such materials is of interest to the child. Such materials, however, would not be the same for all children.

Many teachers do not seem to realize the importance of the nature of the content. For many children the content of the usual "reading books" is inappropiate and lacking in meaning. A boy told the writer, "In other schools you had books like the whole class and they weren't any good and here you can read any book. They're more exciting and have more variety. At least it's not boring." Another pupil referred to his teacher saying " [she] helped me in finding things to read and reading them. I usually don't get many things to read." If there is something in which they are interested children read; otherwise they often do not choose to do so. One child stated, "Every lion and cat book I see I read. [How many?] About 9." An eight-year-old girl in the little rural Sierra school in Aibonito district spoke appreciatively of the

book she had just read about a cat but also indicated that she wasn't going to read anything more "because there are no more books about cats."

The Goal of Equality in Reading Instruction

Consideration has been given to the implications of equal opportunity in the when and how of reading instruction. It is evident that equal opportunity will involve provision for meeting the needs of children as individuals, not as a group. It is appropriate, therefore, to question at this point whether individualized instruction in reading is possible in Puerto Rico. The answer would appear to be yes. The project on individualized teaching undertaken by the Department of Education in Puerto Rico in eight rural schools of the island in the school year 1968-69 demonstrated that individualized teaching is possible and that children profit from it.[11] Children in those eight classes did a lot of reading that year and appeared to grow in skill and interest in reading.

The factor of interest in reading, although often overlooked, is of as great importance as that of developing skill in reading. Rivlin says:

> Knowing how many words a child can read in a minute may be interesting, and possibly important, but such a figure tells us nothing about whether he has developed the habit of reading.... When we have a child's scores on innumerable tests - even when we also have the grade norms, age norms, and percentile norms - we still know little about the youngster.... It is of little use to know that he reads rapidly and understands what he reads, if we do not know that he hates to read and never reads a book except as an assignment.[12]

The importance of the desire to read was stressed by the late James E. Allen, when he was U. S. Commissioner of Education. Speaking before the

annual convention of the National Association of State Boards of Education in September 1969 he proclaimed his crusade to assure that

> No one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire to read to the full limits of his capability.

Allen referred to this as "education's 'Moon'--the target for the decade ahead". If Allen's goal is to be carried out in the decade of the Seventies, which is now here, there must be equality in reading instruction for all children.

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